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ABSTRACT

A two-part pilot study investigated and categorized the roles verbal and nonverbal communication play in the initiation of sexual intercourse. The study also explored the manner in which partners accept or reject sexual overtures, the contexts and antecedents of sexual initiation, and the changes in sexual behavior which occur as a consequence of the duration of the relationship. Two subject pools were tapped for the study, the first involving 32 undergraduates in speech classes at the University of Texas, and the second involving 15 student and nonstudent subjects. Results included that: (1) there are four major categories of nonverbal signals couples use to communicate a desire to initiate sex with their partners: touching, hugging, kissing, and looking; (2) the majority of verbal cues are indirect and require the hearer to make significant inferential leaps, as do many of the direct verbal requests for sex, which require either inferential leaps or special knowledge possessed only by the couple; (3) antecedent behaviors surrounding the initiation of sex involve "being playful," and the initiation of sex is most likely to occur in the bedroom and the bathroom; (4) the acceptance and rejection of sexual advances was most commonly signaled by reciprocating a gesture or movement, or not reciprocating, respectively; (5) verbal channels were predominantly used in indicating that only affection was desired; and (6) reported changes in sexual behavior over the course of relationships include more egalitarian initiation of sex, "less talk," and "direct communication" about sex. (Thirty-one references are attached.) (SR)

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VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN THE INITIATION OF SEX

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the finding of a two part pilot study which investigated the roles verbal and nonverbal communication play in the initiation of sexual intercourse. In addition, the study explored the manner in which partners accept or reject sexual overtures, the contexts and antecedents of sexual initiation, and the changes in sexual behavior which occur as a consequence of the duration of the relationship.

(These findings are preliminary and in process. Please do not cite at this time.)

VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION IN THE INITIATION OF SEX

It has been written that "the more we know about sexuality and the more we can educate members of our society, the better able they will be to cope with personal relationships" (McDonald, 1988, p. 59). It would seem, to echo McDonald, that the more we know about the communication in relationships which concerns sex, the better able people will be to cope with sexuality. Because there is sufficient evidence that ignorance about sex and sexual communication has exacted a severe and unnecessary price on the ignorant, it would seem critical to conduct research concerning sexual communication.

That people in relationships are confused about communication in sexual matters is fairly well documented. Sexual signals, particularly nonverbal signals, are often vague, nonspecific, and liable to be misunderstood. Those nonverbal signals which are sent may not be binding on either party and may be withdrawn or refused without causing a direct affront (Cook, 1977). Cook (1977) goes on to write:

> nonverbal behavior such as a smile or moving away may often be just as clear as the spoken word, but the rules forbid one to mention

> it. It is not considered proper to say, "But you smiled at me when we met which meant you were interested" or "Why have you moved away? Don't you like me?" This rule exists to safeguard the essential feature of nonverbal interchange - its vagueness, lack of commitment, and the fact that it cannot be "taken down and used in evidence (p. 133-134).

The consequence of this ambiguity and social proscription for seeking clarification is considerable misunderstanding. In fact, Masters and Johnson's (1970) study demonstrated how inept men and women are in reading others' cues and communicating sexual preferences.

Hott and Hott (1980) write that misinterpretations during sex are often misinterpretations of body language. Facial grimaces, moans, groans, and other utterances are interpreted as indicators of pain; perspiration, increased respiration, and foot spasms are interpreted as sexually negative responses; and gag reflexes are interpreted as disgust. Their conclusion is that "couples often sabotage their own and each other's sexual pleasure by misreading and distorting sexual cues" (Hott & Hott, 1980, p. 3).

Because there seems to be such a strong societal proscription against clarifying nonverbal signals, it is not surprising that Hott & Hott (1980) and Masters & Johnson (1970) found ample cases of misunderstanding in sexual

relations. Nevertheless, it is believed that nonverbal communication carries more of the communicative burden when persons express their sexual intentions.

It is all the more surprising, then, that there has been a dearth of research focusing specifically on the nonverbal aspects of sexual communication. Instead, we encountered research which included nonverbal communication only in addition to other issues; in no study was nonverbal communication the major focus.

In an effort to come to understand the place nonverbal communication has vis-a-vis sexual behavior, this essay reviews relevant literature and offers some preliminary findings from a two part pilot study.

SEXUAL COMMUNICATION - SCRIPTING

Despite its importance and relevance, talk about sex has either been relegated to the status of taboo (Baxter & Wilmot, 1985; Cavan, 1968), engaged in indirectly (Brown & Auerback, 1981; Jesser, 1978; Mead, 1981), or simply misunderstood (Fay, 1977; Hott & Hott, 1980) by those who are involved intimately. Simon and Gagnon (1968, cited in Roth, 1987) posit three reasons for avoiding sex talk: "1) sex is associated with guilt, 2) the sexual experience is profoundly intense, and 3) sexuality is potentially dangerous" (p. 3). In addition, others have concluded that there is a predominant myth in our culture that sex

should just happen naturally if "it's right" and should not be talked about explicitly (Roth, 1987). If communication about sex is aversive for the above reasons, then we must ask, "How do people communicate their sexual intentions?"

With social and mythical impediments actively frustrating sexual communication, it would appear that scripting (Shank & Abelson, 1977) and particularly sexual scripting (Laws & Schwartz, 1977; Levin, 1975; Simon & Gagnon, 1986; Storms, Stivers, Lambers, & Hill, 1981) may provide a means by which persons engage one another without actually having to talk about sex in explicit ways. In a general observation on human behavior, Simon and Gagnon (1986) have concluded that "it is difficult to conceive of any behavior, except that which is in fact biologically programmed, that is not scripted" (p. 104). More specifically, sexual scripts are described by Gagnon and Simon (1973) as:

> involved in learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequences of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel sequences, setting limits on sexual responses and linking meaning from nonsexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experience (p. 19).

Thus, when faced with new and unfamiliar social situations (or situations involving someone new) people rely upon socially constructed patterns of

behavior as a means of getting them along in an interaction until they have gathered sufficient information upon which they can base further conduct. Three types of scripts have been identified - cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts, and intrapsychic scripts (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) - although in practice the distinctions are obscured.

It has been suggested that sexual behavior which is new and uncertain, at least in the early stages of relationships, must be guided (or scripted) by cultural scenarios which "not only specify appropriate objects, aims, and desirable qualities of self-other relations but also instruct in times, places, sequences of gesture and utterance" (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, p. 105). Regardless of the amount of sexual experience which the intimate partners posses, in each new relationship there is a unique dynamic which must be somehow accommodated. The focus of the present study is to further our understanding of how this dynamic gets created by the interactants.

STRATEGIES AND PATTERNS IN THE INITIATION OF SEX

The literature which focuses on the manner in which sexual activity is initiated generally falls into one of two categories: who initiates sex and how sex is initiated. Despite the fact that both categories are represented, the bulk of the research has been focused on the former and considerably less on the latter.

Consonant with cultural stereotypes for sexual role playing, research has shown that males are cast as the initiators and women the limit setters of sexual behavior (Ehrmann, 1959; Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Komarovsky, 1976; Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1976, 1977). In addition, men report initiating sexual intercourse more frequently than women (McCormick, 1979; Spitz, Gold, & Adams, 1975). Even fairly recently, Grauerholz and Serpe (1985) found that "men feel more comfortable than women initiating sexual intercourse and remaining sexually autonomous, while women feel more comfortable than men refusing such sexual advances" (p. 1041). They refer to this as the use of "proactive power" by men and "reactive power" by women. Their conclusion regarding this double standard is well grounded.

Interestingly, in a study which included both profeminist and traditional students as subjects, McCormick (1979) found that students still stereotyped "having sex" as a male goal and "avoiding sex" as a female goal (subjects were unmarried college men and women). This is consistent with Peplau et al. (1977) who found that even couples who see themselves as egalitarian in their sex-roles continue to engage in traditional sexual role behavior. That is, males initiate and females accede to or refuse sexual overtures.

However, it must be noted that in a study involving married couples the pattern of initiation seems to change over the course of a relationship. Brown and Auerback (1981) reported that "men initiate coitus more frequently than their

wives. In the first year of marriage the frequency is 3:1, men over women. With the passage of time the ratio changed to 60:40, men and women" (p. 107). Generally, women gained about 1% for each year of marriage. These results suggest that patterns reported by the unmarried students in the McCormick study may have resulted from persons who were either not involved in intimate relationships or if involved, had not been for long. It is likely that initiation patterns for couples, regardless of marital status, is mediated by the longevity of the relationship. Further, it would seem logical that even in unmarried couples, those who have been in relationships longer may report patterns of coitus initiation consistent with married couples.

In addition to the question of who initiates coitus, researchers have also examined the use of direct vs. indirect strategies in the process of initiation. Jesser (1978) found that more than 50% of females and males reported directly asking for sex and were also found to be generally less conventional, more assertive, and more likely to be involved with men who use more explicit means of asking for sex (56% of males reported asking directly for sex). Furthermore, he found that 70% of females and males reported using more indirect "signals" such as touching, allowing hands to "wander." McCormick (1979) discovered that both men and women report using more indirect strategies for initiating sex and more direct strategies for avoiding sex.

NONVERBAL INITIATION OF SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

The manner in which nonverbal sexual communication has been reported in the literature is often acontextual and tangential. Metts and Cupach (1988) indicate that there are scripts which guide the nonverbal cues which are employed by both men and women in the early courting stages. These opening sequences are described as displays of courtship readiness (Scheflen, 1981) and may take the form of smiling, intermittent long and short gazes, downward glances, and hair flipping by females (Moore, 1985). These findings are helpful in providing information about how persons signal a readiness to establish social contact and may prove analogous to the behavior of more intimate couples as they initiate coitus.

In their research, Jesser (1978) and McCormick (1979) derived categories of indirect/nonverbal strategies of sexual initiation from the extant literature (not reported) which then became items on questionnaires. These instruments asked subject to rate how frequently they employed each strategy or technique to initiate sexual intercourse. Items included were: body language (using facial expression, posture, physical distance, and relatively subtle gestures to communicate sexual intention), manipulation (hinting at sexual intentions by subtly altering one's appearance, the setting, or the topic of conversation) and deception (McCormick, 1979). Jesser (1978) included the following "sexual signalling behavior" items: code words with which the other is familiar (See also

Brown & Auerback, 1981); Hopper, Knapp, & Scott, 1981), eye contact, touching (hugging, kissing, etc.), change in appearance or clothing, removal of clothing, change in tone of voice, indirect talk of sex, allowing hands to wander, lying down, and so on.

Brown and Auerback (1981) report that 60% of subjects used nonverbal techniques and only 40% verbal techniques in initiating sex. THe most common nonverbal techniques were: "nongenital touching or body caressing, kissing, genital touching, or fondling. Other nonverbal techniques included the use of music, a fire in the fireplace, reading sexually explicit material, and the consumption of alcoholic beverages" (p. 109). Thus, it appears as though there is a fairly high degree of consensus on strategies employed as reported across studies. Yet, these studies lack the interactional perspective necessary to gauge the effect of such strategies. Sexual communication, like all forms of interpersonal communication, is not produced in a vacuum but in relation to another participant. It has its antecedents and its consequences.

The present research, in an effort to extend the research on the communication involved in the initiation of sexual intercourse, posed the following research questions:

1. What nonverbal and verbal cues do people use to initiate sexual intercourse?

2. What are the contexts and antecedent conditions of the initiation of sex?

3. How do partners signal acceptance or rejection of sexual overtures?

4. What nonverbal and verbal cues do persons use to signal a desire for affection but not sex?

5. What changes in sexual behavior are reported as a consequence of longevity of the relationship?

Method

Subjects

Two subject pools were tapped for this study. The first involved a sample of 54 undergraduates in speech classes at the University of Texas. Of those 54, 32 provided answers sufficiently complete to include them (17 males and 15 females). They were involved in relationships which ranged from less than 6 months to five years (approximate average duration, 1.5 years).

The second group consisted of 15 student and nonstudent subjects (10 women and 5 men) who were involved in ongoing sexually active relationships whose durations ranged from three months to more than 40 years and averaged 6.65 years (six were one year or less, nine were two years or longer).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data for the first portion of the study were collected using an open-ended questionnaire. As a starting point, it was decided to let subjects provide what they felt were the relevant details of sexual interactions. In five questions, the

questionnaire asked subjects to describe in as much detail as possible how they initiated sex, how their partners initiated sex, how they and their partners respond to such initiations, and how they behaved differently if affection, not sex, was desired.

For the second portion of the study, subjects were interviewed and tape recorded by trained research assistants. Those recordings were subsequently transcribed by the authors. Interviews lasted from 30-45 minutes each and consisted of free responses to a prearranged schedule of questions with follow-up probes. Subjects were asked to recall the last time they had sex, describing it in terms of who initiated it, the verbal and nonverbal signals sent, the general tone of the encounter, the activities or events preceding it, the context of the encounter, and he changes in the relationship regarding the initiation of sex over time.

The data from both parts were then subjected to a process of analytic induction which "involves scanning the data for categories, developing working typologies and hypotheses in an examination of initial cases, then modifying and refining them on the basis of subsequent cases" (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981, p. 57).

Results and Discussion

The findings of this research will be reported as answers to the five research questions and in the order in which they were posed. We will begin with a typology of nonverbal and verbal cues used to initiate sex, then move to the contexts and antecedent conditions in which they can be found, differences in nonverbal and verbal cues used when initiating affection rather than sexual intercourse, and finally, report changes in sexual behavior as a consequence of relational duration.

NONVERBAL SIGNALS

Analysis of the data suggest that there are four major categories of nonverbal signals couples use to communicate a desire to initiate sex with their partners: touching, hugging, kissing, and looking. Foremost among them are touching behaviors which include "fondling," "stroking," "rubbing inner thigh," and "hands on breasts/genitals." While the first two of these are ambiguous in terms of which parts of the body are "fondled" or "stroked," it seems safe to conclude that, in light of the other examples, they also indicate the touching of what would be considered "private" body parts such as breasts and genitals. Because these are the erogenous areas of the body, it may be that they constitute the most direct and obvious of the nonverbal cues indicating a desire for sex.

The second category of nonverbal signals involves "hugging" the partner. Included in this category are reported activities described as "snuggling," "cuddling," and "body pressing" (ex. "She lays on top of me real close like we're having sex, but with our clothes on"). Although "hugging" was also reported as a signal that affection was desired but not sex, it was frequently reported as a way to signal a desire for sex. These behaviors suggest that while they may not necessarily always lead to sex, they are often used to communicate a desire for sexual intercourse and may, in fact, be prior to other cues which are more clearly indicative of a desire for sex (such as those touching cues above).

The third category of nonverbal cues is kissing. The kind of kissing described is fairly specific and excludes pecks on the cheeks, light kisses of greeting, and the like. Instead the kissing which is interpreted as a form of sexual initiation is described as kissing "deeply" and "passionately" or as "kissing breasts," and "kissing shoulders, neck, and ears." Deep and passionate kissing is most often characterized as "French Kissing" which involves parted libs and touching tongues. It would appear as though there is a qualitative difference between types of kissing which lead to sex and the types that signal greeting, affection, or kinship ("Kiss on the cheek or head, not the lips").

Finally, the fourth category involves "looking" at the other in a particular way. Signals such as "raising the eyebrows," "loving looks," "that certain look," "that sexy look," and "erotic glances" are described by subjects as cues

displaying an interest in a more intimate encounter. Because subjects were unable to describe this "look," it may be that it is a particular facial expression in which eyes play a dominant role (McCormick, 1979). Only one subject was able to describe these eye behaviors ("eyes half closed like Marilyn Monroe"), thus it may be that couples have private "look" cues, facial expressions, or eye signals which have been developed and are understood only by them.

VERBAL SIGNALS

The verbal signals which were reported by subjects as communicating sexual interest can generally be characterized as either: (1) indirect suggestions of the speaker's desires and intentions or (2) direct requests for sex. The majority of verbal cues are indirect and require the hearer to make significant inferential leaps. Perhaps more interestingly, many of the direct verbal signals also require either inferential leaps or special knowledge possessed only by the couple.

Indirect

Indirect cues involved the categories "complementing" and "asking questions." Compliments include statements such as "you smell nice," "how nice you look," and "you're soft" were mentioned as ways in which subjects indicated to their partners that they were in the mood for sex. The second

category, asking questions, includes utterances such as "What are you doing after dinner?" "Can we go somewhere?" or statements like "Let's go home for lunch," "let's go somewhere," "I'd like to be alone with you," and "I miss you sooo much." Comments in both categories are potentially vague, however, they are suggestive of intent and leave the hearer room for interpretation.

Direct - Relationship Specific

Cues typified as direct but accessible only by those within the relationship initially appeared to be indirect, but were more appropriately categorized as direct. This category includes relational idioms and slang terms. While examples of specific idioms were not provided by subjects, they did report, in a categorical sense, that they used "phrases only we know," "slang words for surprise effect," "stock phrases," "innuendos," and "jokes" to convey the message that they desired sex. These results support the notion that couples develop an intimate language of their own which require specific relational knowledge to be rendered interpretable (Brown & Auerback, 1981; Hopper, Knapp, & Scott, 1981). Although these idioms and slang may seem like more indirect signals, it would appear as though some idioms may have very clear meanings and so represent direct requests for sex and require little interpretation on the part of the hearer.

Direct - Generalized

The second category of direct verbal signals are those which require no special knowledge of the couple's private language to understand. "Let's make love," "I want to make love," "I want you," "I want to feel you," and "show me, teach me, tell me what you like" are signals subjects reported and obviously need no specialized knowledge and few inferences to be made sense of. While this category was reasonably well represented, reports of nonverbal and indirect cues outweighed these more direct requests.

In general, these results are consistent with and support much of the research which has gone before. The category system is new, but the verbal and nonverbal behaviors reported here parallel those which have been provided elsewhere (Brown and Auerback, 1981; Jesser, 1978; Hopper, Knapp, & Scott, 1981; McCormick, 1979).

CONTEXTS AND ANTECEDENT CONDITIONS

When asked what conditions or circumstances led to sexual intercourse, subjects reported a wide range of activities. Because of their diversity, these proved more difficult to systematize. The majority of the responses centered on activities occurring within the context of being in bed, being in the bedroom, or being in the bathroom. The most common antecedent behavior entailed play or playing with one another.

Among our respondents, the bedroom and bathroom were the locations most immediately likely to foster behavior which would lead to sexual intercourse. It is there that doing "getting ready for bed things," "changing clothes," "taking a shower together," or initiating sex "just before sleeping or after waking up" are most likely to occur. It seems probable that the bedroom/bathroom is the one place where the features which are liable to contribute to the initiation of sex are most likely to be found: close proximity to and contact with the other, a minimum of impediments (clothing, lack of privacy, or children for example), and a comfortable accommodating space.

While the conditions surrounding being in the bedroom provide the most likely immediate context for the initiation of sexual intercourse, the antecedent activity most often mentioned was "play." Subjects reported that in the time leading up to sex, they and their partners were "goofing off, tickling," "ribbing each other," "teasing," "engaging in sexual banter," and "making a game out of it." In fact, when asked what the general tone was when they were initiating sex, approximately 73% of the interview subjects reported that it was humorous (e.g. silly, funny, playful). Further, nearly 23% of those subjects reported that the tone was erotic and nearly 20% combined humorous and erotic; suggesting that the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

Finally, talking was revealed as one of the activities which led to sex. Whether it was talking about sex, the future, or just "everyday things," subjects saw talking as a condition that could lead directly, but not necessarily, to sex.

ACCEPTANCE AND DECLINE OF SEXUAL INVITATION

When asked how they signalled that they were accepting sexual advances made by their partners, almost without exception subjects (regardless of whether male or female) reported that they responded with the same gesture or movement. Reciprocation involves doing whatever the partner has just done, whether it be kissing with the tongue, strong caresses, or removing a piece of clothing from either the partner or the self.

Conversely, the most common way to reject an advance was: not reciprocating. This appears to be almost universally understood that sex is not desired. In addition, this may be accompanied by a verbal response, "No, not now." In many cases, subjects were quick to add that rejection of only the sex, not the partner, was intended, so that caressing or further explanations were often produced.

Male subjects also indicated that they create any number of excuses in the form of "things to do and say" when they are not interested in having sex. Engaging in future talk, thinking of things to do (suddenly), or pretending to fall asleep are others are all creative ways males reported for avoiding sex.

Females, on the other hand, appear more comfortable in simply saying, "No." Female students did not list the varied number of things to do and say that males did when sex is not desired. This difference in behavior may be due to the fact that males are supposed to want to have sex at all times, according to the prevailing sexual script; therefore, they feel pressured into "dreaming up excuses" when they do not feel like it. Females may not be under this pressure, and so perhaps they do not feel the need to justify their refusals to the same extent.

In the interview data, respondents were asked to describe an incident in which they or their partner declined to have sex. The reason most often cited was simply being too tired. The following scenario was typical: "I initiated and he was too tired. It was midnight, we had gone to a party that night, and he had to get up at 5 AM. He just said, 'No thank you.'" Another woman reported: "I asked him, 'Do you want to mess around?' and my husband just said no, he was sorry, but he was too tired." Both of these recollections invoke the importance of the verbal component in the declination of sexual overtures (McCormick, 1979). It may be also that the type of initiation - verbal or nonverbal - may mediate the form of the declination.

SIGNALS FOR SEX OR AFFECTION

It would seem that with the significance of nonverbal communication in the initiation of sex and its inherent ambiguity, one of the most likely pitfalls in sexual communication would be the signalling of a desire for affection rather than sex. When asked, respondents indicated that the verbal channel was predominant in indicating that only affection was desired. A frequent response was "I just want to hug." Interestingly, a large proportion of males reported that they engaged in serious/future talk when affection rather than sex was desired. Apparently, thoughts of the future - including marriage, careers, and where to live - had a kind of sobering effect on the interactants.

From a nonverbal perspective, respondents either set limits on what parts of the body could be touched ("no hands below the belt") or could tell the difference between the initiation of affection vs. sex based on the "situation" in which the gesture was made: specifically, the time available (with sex requiring more time than affection), and the intensity with which a particular gesture was made. One woman addressed both in her answer: "I know the difference. We know each others' schedule and when we would have time. We can tell the difference between a short cuddle, kiss, hug -- and that's all there's going to be -- and when it might lead to something more."

CHANGES IN SEXUAL RELATIONSHIP

The review of the literature suggests that persons in intimate relationships change their sexual behavior towards one another over the duration of their relationships. More specifically, previous studies report that while males initiated sex more frequently in newly married couples, females initiated sex more often as the relationship proceeds (Brown & Auerback, 1981). It was thought that changes in couples vis-a-vis sex might possibly extend beyond simple changes in which of the two was more likely to initiate coitus.

When asked what kinds of changes they had observed in their relationships over time with regards to their sexual behavior, subjects recounted a number of changes. Consistent with previous research, some subjects recounted a number of changes. Consistent with previous research, some subjects reported that they were currently more equal in terms of initiating sex. Subjects reported that in the early stages of the relationship males were more likely to initiate sex than females but that it was more equal now. However, when asked about the last time they had sex, interview subjects indicated that males initiated sex far more than females (males - 11, females - 2, mutual - 2). This may then be consistent with Peplau, Rubin, and Hill (1977) who found that couples who see themselves as egalitarian continue to engage in traditional sexual role behavior.

Subjects felt that they followed more norms ("didn't want to be thought weird") and were more like to play traditional roles ("we know each other better now") in the early stages of their relationships. These reports imply that early in relationships, couples rely on culturally based scripted behavior to see them through until they know enough about each others' "real selves" to use that knowledge as the basis for interaction (Simon & Gagnon, 1973). One consequence of these changes may be the reports by subjects of being more "creative," and "adventurous" in their sexual behavior later in the relationships. Sexual behavior which could be interpreted as weird, abnormal, and/or off-putting in the early stages of a relationship might not be seen the same way later after there is more familiarity and trust has developed between sexual partners.

Conclusion

The results reported here provide mixed support for the findings of previous research suggesting that couples may become more equal in the initiation of sexual intercourse. While some respondents suggested that the initiation of sex had changed and that they were currently more equal or took turns, in response to a direct question about the last time they had sex, the overwhelming response was that it was the male who did the initiating. Thus,

there may be some discrepancy between the subjective belief of egalitarianism and the actual behavior in which couples engage.

In terms of nonverbal and verbal cues individuals use to indicate to their partners that they wish to have sex, a two part typology was constructed. This typology included both nonverbal and verbal cues, dividing each into further categories. Nonverbal cues fell into four major categories: touching, hugging, kissing, and the more ambiguous behaviors. Three categories of verbal cues emerged as well: indirect, direct - relationship specific, and direct - generalized.

What is perhaps most interesting about both the nonverbal and the verbal cues is their inherent ambiguity. Only direct verbal cues is their inherent ambiguity. Only direct verbal cues such as "let's make love," relationally specific idioms, and nonverbal cues such as "touching genitals" would appear to require little speculation on the part of the receiver as to the intentions of the initiator. The remainder of the cues in both the verbal and nonverbal categories would appear to demand more decoding skills on the part of the receiver. A tentative conclusion would be that by using more ambiguous cues, initiators may be taking a less risky route to sex by being able to plausibly deny her/his intentions.

Despite the fact that McCormick (1979) found that students still stereotyped having sex as a male goal and avoiding sex as a female goal, our results suggests that females and males generally believe that they both initiate and decline sex and that males may do so in some rather creative ways.

Reciprocation appears to be the most likely manner in which acceptance is signalled, while direct verbal responses and nonverbal nonreciprocation seem most likely to be used to signal rejection.

Somewhat curious are our findings that the antecedent behaviors surrounding the initiation of sex involve "being playful." It may be that when "play" successfully leads to sex when both desire it, then both partners are satisfied. However, if one person is interested but the other is not, the initiator may be able to claim that s/he was "just playing" and save face. In addition, the person who is rejecting the overtures can do so without causing an affront to the other. Reducing the risk of being turned down and thus avoiding feelings of rejection would appear to be strong motivators for engaging in more ambiguous and indirect strategies in the initiation of sex.

In an effort to situate the initiation of sexual intercourse, contexts and antecedent conditions were sought. The findings support an intuitively plausible conclusion that the initiation of sex is most likely to occur in the bedroom (including in bed) and the bathroom. Each of these locations provide conditions which are most likely to foster intimate contact, a necessity coitus. It is in these contexts that couples can achieve a close proximity to and contact with each other, encounter a minimum of impediments, and find a comfortable and accommodating space (the bed, maybe the tub too).

It is interesting that "play" is the antecedent condition most often reported as leading to sex. In addition to the conclusions above, it may be that the "goofing off," "tickling," and "ribbing" serve both to bring partners into close proximity to one another and to arouse them in nonsexual ways (increased heart rate, sweating, etc.) which may the lead to sexual arousal.

When investigating changes in sexual behavior over the course of relationships, previous research has limited itself to changes in who does the initiating. In addition to those changes, the subjects in this study suggest that there are other changes as well. That they reported "less talk" and "direct communication" about sex suggests that the uncertainty associated with sex which they may have felt in the early stages of the relationship was reduced to the point where expectations were more clearly established.

The findings of this study have generally supported much of the research which has gone before. Its major strength lies in the extensions which it attempts to make regarding a more systematic categorization of verbal and nonverbal cues and the patterns of behavior sexual partners engage in to signal acceptance or rejection of sexual overtures. In addition, this study takes an initial cut at understanding how persons signal a desire for affection rather than sex; a potentially problematic issue.

Clearly, these findings are preliminary. We attempt to describe the phenomena of sexual initiation in general terms, suggesting areas which could

profit from further investigation. While the subjects in the study included both students and non-students, the numbers are relatively small. We believe further research, tapping an even broader sample, is necessary.

In succeeding research, we anticipate interviewing, albeit separately, both members of dyads. Future research would benefit from inclusion of both members of a couple in order to corroborate the reports of each. Finally, we have tried to get a preliminary understanding of initiation and acceptance or rejection of sexual overtures, but research which focuses more on the interaction which occurs in sexual intercourse should lead to a better understanding of how verbal and nonverbal communication may each dominate at particular stages of coitus.

As always, initial forays have been undertaken, and much more is left to do.

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